



What Makes a Good Manager?

This issue of ASK we look at several projects that recovered from serious problems after a critical change was made in how they were managed

NOBODY WILL BE BLINDED BY THE BRILLIANCE OF THIS insight: Projects often get into trouble because of how they are managed. Sometimes they recover; sometimes they don't. When the reason they recover stems directly from changes in management, that begs the question: What happened?

We return to this theme over and over again in *ASK*. You may recall these remarks by Dr. Charles Pellerin in Issue 13, commenting on his tenure as NASA's Director of Astrophysics: "I was frustrated that I couldn't anticipate and recognize the difference between project managers who were going to succeed and project managers who were doomed to fail. We could predict things like sensor performance. We could understand the detectors. We could understand the power systems. But we couldn't understand this one critical, invisible piece: What makes a good manager?"

One approach to answering that question is by looking at cases where project fortunes reversed following a change in managers. In "Bringing Up Baby," Gus Guastafarro remembers being asked to take over a research project in which the project manager he replaced was also the lead researcher. To achieve the promise of the prototype aircraft they were building, Guastafarro not only had to overcome management problems created by his predecessor, but to do it in such a way that did not compromise research goals.

In another story, Alan Zak, a Vice President at Line6, tells of selecting a project manager to produce a new line of guitars. The project manager seemed to have what it takes—the technical smarts, an interest in project management, and, because he was a guitarist himself, an intimate understanding of the product—but he quickly found himself in over his head. Zak's story, "Sounds Clear Enough," may well teach those a level or two above the project manager about how to recognize a problem situation before it unfolds.

Mary Bothwell's story, "Walking the Fine Line," picks up this theme from Alan Zak, but depicts a different approach to solve the problem. A division manager at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory (JPL), Bothwell was concerned that a change in management at a critical point in a project could prove more destructive than constructive. Bothwell's story offers an interesting look at the paradox of how to positively impact what's happening within the project from outside it. How closely can upper management get involved before "micro-management" sets in?

Managers change for reasons other than because projects get in trouble. People move on to other jobs, or they get promoted. In some of those cases, a project manager's job is simply to keep things on track. Such is the type of situation described by Steve Garber in his practice, "History: A Practicum." Garber offers some practical insights on how to be a more effective communicator.

In addition to all this, we have an interview with JPL's Director of Flight Projects, Tom Gavin; a before and after story about a reengineering effort at the Hubble Control Center; and feature writers Terry Little and Scott Cameron return after getting a rest in Issue 16. The APPL spotlight this time is on the Project Management Development Process (PMDP). You may be surprised to find who's talking up PMDP at NASA.

While we may not have the definitive answer to "What makes a good manager?"—we believe this issue of *ASK* will contribute to your conversations about that subject. •